THE INQUISITOR
Luke 19:1-10
September 12, 1982

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Sometime in the last decade we became aware that a surprising number of people suddenly begin to do peculiar things half-way or so through their life journey. We have a distinct propensity, it seems, to start acting funny about midstream. Classically, the successful corporate attorney runs off to Malibu with the new secretary; or the mother of three and president of the PTA leaves home to write poetry in Greenwich Village. Less classically, more commonly, people suddenly simply lose interest in life, work, play, sex; begin to drink too much, have trouble sleeping, feel bored most of the time, depressed, and start foolish affairs.

see Ex. 12/86 NYT

Gail Sheehy wrote a book called Passages and helped us name the phenomenon I have been describing - the now venerable "mid-life crisis". It is, of course, a crisis of the spirit. It seems to have its origin in that most devastating discovery any of us ever makes, namely that we are not going to live forever.

It is given a strong shove by the second most devastating discovery, namely that the life you are experiencing in mid-stream is probably as full and exciting and dramatic as it's ever going to be. Or - in the inimitable rhetoric of Flip Wilson's old Geraldine characterization - "What you see is what you get."

What people endure for 35 years without thinking much about it because they are confident things will get better, suddenly becomes unbearable with the realization that it isn't going to get much better. Suddenly, without much warning, and certainly without much understanding, what yesterday was a warm and secure home, feels today like a trap. A comfortable marriage suddenly feels like a cage; children become a nuisance, a burden, and the once normal round of liveable, busy, daily activities seems like a repetitive exercise in meaningless motion. Mid-life crisis: a desparate, lonely, urgent need for direction, a goal, a reason for living. John Milton perhaps did it best justice with these words: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

Zaccheus - Roman Internal Revenue Service Chief for Jericho, was having a classic mid-life crisis. The Gospel writer, who obviously never read Gail Sheehy, says that Zaccheus climbed the tree to see Jesus because he was short. I'm proposing that he was having a mid-life crisis, that he hitched up his robe and acted in this highly peculiar and inappropriate way because he was lost, looking for his own soul, drifting, wondering if there was any joy, any excitement, any meaning left in life for him. But unlike others of his station, Nicodemus, for instance, who sought out Jesus under cover of darkness, Zaccheus chose a gesture that would provide him a glimpse without forcing the issue overly much.

Who was this man who looks so familiar the minute we begin to think about him? In a light-hearted book about people in the Bible, Frederick Buechner calls him a "sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job." (Peculiar Treasurers, p. 180). What can be known for sure about Zaccheus is that he was hated and he was rich - and the two facts are related. Rome had devised a most despicably effective method of collecting revenues from its

occupied people by employing nationals to administer the system. They hired Jews to collect Roman taxes. Tax collectors were, of course, regarded as traitors. Worse, they profited handsomely from their betrayal. It's more than conjecture, therefore, to characterize Zaccheus as alienated, lonely, despised.

In fact we know that the mess of pottage for which we sell our soul always tastes lousy. We clearly understand that it profits nothing if one's soul is lost in the deal. We were never more certain that the self, the humanity which belongs to each, cannot be purchased, nor enhanced by an accumulation of things, Roman denarii or Super Saver C.D.'s. It is more than a flippant guess, I would submit, that this pathetic man was in deep spiritual trouble.

Jesus looked up and saw him perched there, ridiculously, and in one glance - I like to believe - understood exactly. And he said, in effect, "What are you doing up there, Zaccheus? Whatever is wrong with you isn't going to get any better sitting up in that tree."

There are a lot of things I like about this little gem of a story. The best thing, however, is that it confirms an idea about God which is there, consistantly, from the beginning. I have called it The Inquisitor.

In the creation story, Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit and so are hiding from the Lord and when the Lord comes walking in the garden he asks: "Where are you?" Moses, guilty of murder, hiding out in the wilderness tending his father-in-law's sheep; and God comes asking, in essence, "Why are you here, Moses, and not with your people?" Elijah, running for his life with Ahab and Jezebel in hot pursuit, holing up in a cave, and the Lord comes and the text reads: "And he said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" The first day of the week after the crucifixion, and the women are at the tomb and the question comes again: "Why are you here? Why do you seek the living among the dead?" The Bible is a book about God, ideas about God, the search for God, only in small measure. Mostly the Bible is a book about God pursuing men and women, following them, flushing them out of their hiding places, forcing them to stand and declare for him which always means becoming fully and uniquely and marvelously human themselves. The Bible is about the Inquisitor who asks relentlessly, in patient but strong love - "What are you doing here?"

C. S. Lewis in his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, tells the story of his early intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage, through doubt, skepticism, rationalism, agnosticism, and finally atheism. But there was something more, something Lewis described as the experience of joy which kept haunting him and hounding him. He wrote, "A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful...There are traps everywhere. Bibles laid open, millions of surprises, fine nets, and strategems. God is, if I may say it, very unscrupuous." (p. 191) For C. S. Lewis, God's pursuit was in the form of intellectual query. He kept bumping into logical reasons why the arguments against God would not stand. Gradually he was forced to acknowledge that the thinkers and writers who spoke the truth most clearly were believers. Reflecting on it years later he wrote, "And so the great Angler played his fish and I never dreamed the hook was in my tongue." (p. 211)

The late Thomas Merton, distinguished philosopher and author who became a Trappist monk, had a similar experience. After years of spiritual struggle, he recalled the critical question: "'What are you waiting for?' said the voice within me. 'Why are you sitting there? It is useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?'" After trying again to talk himself out of it, Merton did get up and go to the nearest Roman Church, found the priest and on the spot declared his intention to be baptized a Christian.

In the postscript of the Zaccheus incident Luke reports Jesus saying that the Son of man came to seek and save the lost. Some people are disappointed to learn that "lost" does not mean damned forever to hell. The Greek word simply means "wandering aimlessly, without a goal". God, the Bible indicates, operates in human life by questioning, by inquiring, by pursuing us even in our lostness, by making us uncomfortable when we are less than we could be.

It is not pushing the Biblical metaphor too far, I believe, to see a once proud people cowering behind a nuclear arsenal, spending money they don't have for more, and God saying to them, "What in the world - what in my name - are you doing there?"

You see the crisis, the aimless wandering, the flight from God is always, at the same time, a betrayal of our own best selves. Zaccheus was a better human being than he had allowed himself to become. Deep inside, Zaccheus was still a strong, honest, compassionate man. Beneath the facade of greed, betrayal, dishonesty, there was still a good person...Just as there are good human beings, wives, husbands, fathers, mothers, friends, colleagues beneath the troubled veneer of those who wander a bit in mid-life. Jesus asked Zaccheus what he was doing up in a tree. Jesus invited him, no--commanded him--to come down and straighten out his life, and to put his priorities in order, and to be his own best self again. And he did it without lecturing, scolding, heaping guilt on guilt, or attacking the already weak self esteem of a very vulnerable human being. He did it, in fact, in the best kind of love, simply by asking Zaccheus to come down.

How does he come to us? The Inquisitor pursues us, even you and me, I believe, sometimes in those tough intellectual categories C. S. Lewis described: in the profoundly simple dichotomy which beckons us to chose in the context of our own lives meaning or meaninglessness, hope or despair, love or apathy, life or death. Sometimes, I believe, God the Inquisitor comes to us in the question itself, in the search and the frustration and the restless anxiety. Sometimes, I believe, God's approach to us is nothing more dramatic than a theological itch we can't scratch, a question we can't answer, a thirst we can't quench. Sometimes, I believe, God's revelation in our lives takes subtle forms - the pain of a guilty conscience, a nagging responsibility, the stirring of new convictions, the awakening of new passion.

Perhaps the deepest insight of faith is that the question of God is itself the best evidence that God exists. Just as hunger is evidence of the existence of food, so the human thirst for the divine is the best and most profound reason for trusting that there is living water. St. Augustine, fourth century, said it beautifully:

"When first I knew thee, Thou didst raise me up that I might see there was somewhat for me to see..." (Confessions VIII, 10)

And even more beautifully:

"Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in thee."

God, the theologians try to teach us, is responsible for raising the issue in the first place. God may be the source of joy and salvation. But he is also, that is to say, responsible for the pain, the struggle, the question itself.

C. S. Lewis said it well:

"Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about man's search for God. To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat." (op. cit., page 227)

Jesus found Zaccheus and asked what he was doing in the tree. Jesus commanded Zaccheus to come down and called him to be his own best self. He did it by strong, accepting love. Zaccheus obeyed. He came down. And my sense of it is that in coming down, in walking with Jesus, publically, Zaccheus did a stronger and more honest thing than he had ever done before. My sense of it is that Jesus' question and Zaccheus's answer resulted in a new life, a new creation. "Today", Jesus said, "salvation has come to this house."

The contemporary version of that, the call of Jesus Christ to you, is to declare yourself, to come down from whatever tree you are using to catch a safely removed glimpse. The call of Jesus Christ to would-be-disciples in the year 1982 is to commit, to cast our lot with him, to give our lives to something worthy of our best and in that way to become ourselves wholly...and in that way to hear those precious words, "Today salvation has come to this house." AMEN.

Inquisitor God, continue to ask, to probe and prod. Make us uncomfortable in lostness. Make us restless until we find rest in thee. And in that moment of honest encounter, when it comes, give us courage to obey: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.